



NEW YORK STATE SENATOR

Owen H. Johnson

## Senator Johnson Sponsors Legislation to Protect Marine and Native Species

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### **Seagrass Protection Act, Invasive Species Awareness Helps Address Threats to Important Ecosystems**

The New York State Senate passed legislation to protect marine habitat and the continued viability of commercial and recreational fishing. The bill (S.4287B), sponsored by Senator Owen Johnson (R-C, Babylon), establishes the Seagrass Protection Act to address threats to these ecologically important species.

Seagrasses are a unique group of flowering plants that have adapted to living fully submerged in coastal marine waters. These plants profoundly influence coastal environments by altering water flow, nutrient cycling, and food web structure. They are an important food source and provide critical habitat and nursery grounds for many animals including commercially, recreationally, and ecologically important fish.

“The passage of this legislation is great news for Long Island! Seagrasses are vital to the health of our bays, providing a habitat for many valuable species of fish and shellfish as well as stabilizing the bay bottom sediments,” Senator Owen H. Johnson said. “ I am proud to sponsor this legislation calling for the protection, maintenance and re-growth of seagrass,

which will ultimately improve the quality of the environment and the fisheries on Long Island.”

While historic seagrass acreage in New York has not been documented, historic photography and records indicate that there may have been 200,000 acres in 1930; today, only 21,803 acres remain.

Seagrass provides environmental benefits by increasing water column oxygen levels through photosynthesis. This is a particularly important function in protecting fish die-offs in areas prone to low oxygen levels during the warm summer months. Studies have also shown that the absorption of excess nitrogen and phosphorus by seagrass can reduce the frequency of nuisance algal blooms.

Protecting seagrass benefits the economy by providing important habitat to New York’s major commercial and recreational fisheries. The two largest shell fisheries in New York, the bay scallop and hard clam, seek protection in seagrass beds and studies have shown that blue crabs rely heavily on seagrass habitat for food, refuge and reproduction. Lobsters utilize eelgrass beds for burrowing, overwintering, and generally prefer seagrass habitat to bare mud. Tautog and other fish lay their eggs on the surface of eelgrass leaves and fluke, striped bass, bluefish and others use seagrass for foraging.

The Seagrass Protection Act gives the state Department of Environmental Conservation the authority to develop management plans for coastal and marine activities which threaten seagrass beds and seagrass restoration efforts. Working with stakeholders, the Act would address some of the factors resulting in seagrass decline, including identifying water quality impacts such as runoff, and allow the state to make recommendations and take action to minimize the effects on seagrass health.

The bill has been sent to the Assembly for consideration.